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ABSTRACT

In these opening remarks to a 1984 International Conference on Education for the Gifted at the University of Stellenbosch, Union of South Africa, the Director-General of National Education summarizes the South African Government's approach to programs for gifted education. The diversity and complexity of the South African population calls for a differentiated approach to the teaching of gifted children. The first or basic phase of such an approach should be the upgrading of the general standard of education of those groups still handicapped by a significant backlog. During the second phase, gifted programs suited to the cultural and linguistic needs of the different groups should be developed and implemented. The government has accepted the principle that all children have a claim to equal educational opportunities, irrespective of race, color, creed, or sex and has incorporated this principle into the National Policy for General Education Affairs Act of 1984. In 1982, the Human Sciences Research Council was commissioned to collect empirical data that will serve as a scientific basis for the formulation of a coordinated national policy for gifted education in South Africa and a continuous research policy in the field. The results will be reported during the course of the conference. (VW)

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INGENIUM 2000 : INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON EDUCATION FOR THE GIFTED

Opening address by

DR P S MEYER

DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF NATIONAL EDUCATION

Stellenbosch

26 June 1984
09h00

EC 301998

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I regard it as an honour and a privilege to be present at this international conference on education for the gifted and to represent the Department of National Education of which I am the professional head, and in a broader sense the Government of the Republic of South Africa, which is responsible for the provision of education to the inhabitants of this country.

To all of you attending this conference, and in particular to delegates and visitors from abroad, I wish to extend a warm welcome. For many decades South Africans have taken pride in what they regard as an established tradition of hospitality. Although

it would appear that this tradition is gradually being eroded by an increasing spirit of materialism, I nevertheless trust that you will experience and savour the warm friendship of the people of Stellenbosch for at least the duration of your stay here in the heart of the winelands of South Africa. And since some of our best wines are cultivated and produced at very reasonable prices by the local farming community, it is not unthinkable that these products may appropriately supplement the traditional hospitality of Stellenbosch in the most enjoyable of ways - after conference hours of course, one hopes.

The University of Stellenbosch deserves our highest praise for having taken the initiative in organising this first international conference in South Africa on the education of the gifted, and on behalf of all the Government departments and statutory bodies concerned with education, I wish to thank the Vice-Chancellor and the Council of the University, the Faculty of Education, and in particular Prof J Cawood and his organising committee, for composing the draft of an important chapter in the history of education on the subcontinent of Africa. Our visitors from abroad may be interested to know that the University of Stellenbosch is the oldest Afrikaans university in South Africa (Afrikaans is the mother tongue of the vast majority of Whites and Coloureds). One

of the main objectives the University has set for itself is the training of high-level manpower for the various professions, and with this end in view it is concentrating on post-graduate academic work. It is proper, therefore, that a university which is actively and successfully providing for the needs of gifted and talented students should be the venue of the first international conference in South Africa at which attention will be focussed on education for the gifted.

In democratic societies it is generally accepted that all men are equal before their Creator, in other words that in a moral sense there are no "inferior" or "superior" human beings. However, it

is also acknowledged that people are different in many ways, and that this fact constitutes a fundamental characteristic of human life. On the subject of human equality G.K. Chesterton remarked that "... all men are equal in the sense that all pennies are equal. Some men are bright or dull, just as some pennies are bright or dull", while Thomson declared that "... equality implies similarity, not sameness. The equality that men proclaim or deny is obviously not equality of talent or merit, but equality of rights."

This view implies that giftedness, or its absence, and talent, or lack of talent, should be accepted as a natural phenomenon.

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Indeed, this fact was acknowledged by St Paul when he wrote as follows to the Corinthians, "For I would that all men were even as myself. But every man has his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that." According to St Paul a "word of wisdom" to one man and "a word of knowledge" to another are gifts from the same Spirit.

I believe that it is both the responsibility and the duty of society to make adequate provision for the education of its gifted members, that is to say if man is to fulfil his Biblical destiny to subdue the earth and have dominion over it. As educators we believe that effective and equal education is the right of all

children and, furthermore, that the education of a nation's children is of such importance that it can lay claim to a fair portion of the nation's economic resources.

If this is true of education as a national community service, it should obviously apply to the education of gifted children as well. However, there is evidence that in many civilised communities this it not the case, and that more attention is focussed and more money is spent on the education of the mentally and physically retarded child than on programmes and facilities for the gifted and talented. Small wonder that some observers claim that today one group of children, the gifted and talented, is the most neglected of all.

It has been, and is still, said that children with exceptional ability will eventually reach the top and that there is, in fact, no need for specially designed supporting programmes for the very able child. Usually the names of famous inventors or statesmen are quoted to prove the point.

However, what these observers do not tell us, is that those who survived and did come out on top probably had to suffer a lot of trauma and, who knows, could have attained greater heights of achievement if they had been given adequate educational opportunities. And if such opportunities, based on the results of comprehensive research, had been provided for the highly gifted

children of a century ago, it is not beyond the bounds of the imagination that the Americans might have succeeded in placing a man on the moon long before Neil Amstrong's "giant leap" in 1969, that cancer might have been conquered, that poverty and malnutrition might have been non-existent by now, and indeed, that the wisdom, insight and judgement of gifted political leaders might have prevented two devastating world wars and the human tragedies prevailing in many parts of the world today.

At this conference different facets of education for the gifted will be discussed by leading educationists and experts in this field. You have come to the conference to impart of your

knowledge and to exchange knowledge. Such an exchange of knowledge invariably gives rise to the creation of knew knowledge, which should be the ultimate aim of an international conference.

In the field of gifted education, and in particular gifted education in the South African context, new knowledge is needed about a variety of matters. We are a developing, emerging nation - a partly "first" and partly "third world" nation - and when provision is made for the educational needs of the gifted children of our diverse population, this fact has to be faced. The identification of gifted children or the implementation of enrichment programmes on an undifferentiated basis would border on

stupidity. Likewise, little success would be achieved if a uniform, undifferentiated educational strategy were to be designed for all our different language and cultural groups. I will clarify this view briefly.

No less than twelve different languages, not including some six dialects, are spoken by the approximately 23 million people living in South Africa. This figure roughly represents the following groups: Whites : 4 1/2 million, Coloureds : 2 1/2 million, Asians : 3/4 million, and Blacks : 15 million (including the approximately 6 million residents of the self-governing Black states).

Afrikaans, an offshoot of Dutch, is the home language of about 60% of the Whites and 85% of the Coloureds, English being spoken by the remainder. English and Afrikaans are the official languages of South Africa and as such they are compulsory school subjects for Whites, Coloureds and Asians. It should also be borne in mind that the Black population is not a homogeneous group, but that it consists of separate peoples, each with it own character, language and culture.

It is obvious that the diversity, indeed the complexity, of the South African population calls for a differentiated approach to the teaching of our gifted children. The first or basic phase of

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such an approach should be the upgrading of the general standard of education of those groups in respect of whom there is still a significant backlog. During the second phase, gifted programmes suited to the cultural and linguistic needs of the different groups should be developed and implemented.

I and my colleagues in leading positions in state departments of education, realise that it would be to the advantage of our beautiful and potentially rich country and its inhabitants if all our gifted children were identified and appropriate programmes designed and implemented. We also acknowledge that giftedness is not restricted to any particular race or ethnic group, language, culture or religion.

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The Government has committed itself unequivocally to raising the standard of education of the entire population by accepting the following principle for the provision of education and writing it into the National Policy for General Education Affairs Act of 1984:

> "Equal opportunities for education, including equal standards in education, for every inhabitant, irrespective of race, colour, creed or sex, shall be the purposeful endeavour of the State."

In addition to its acceptance of the principle that all children have a claim to equal educational opportunities, the Government has given irrefutable proof that it regards the education of the gifted as a matter of great importance.

At the beginning of 1982 the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) was commissioned by the Department of National Education to conduct an investigation into the following:

- The current situation in regard to gifted education in schools under the control of all the different education departments.

- The nature and quality of gifted programmes at present being offered.
- The training and availability of teachers for gifted children.
- Research projects on giftedness undertaken at universities and colleges of education.
- Identification techniques and norms.

* Didactical procedures applied in schools to provide for the needs of gifted children.

The main object of the investigation was to collect empirical data that will serve as a scientific basis for the formulation of (a) a co-ordinated national policy for gifted education in South Africa and (b) a national continuous research policy in regard to gifted education.

The research project was supervised by a panel of specialists drawn from education departments, universities and private centres for the gifted in South Africa. The investigation was completed a

few months ago, and some of the findings and recommendations will be disclosed at this conference. If they are accepted by the Government, and there is little doubt that this will be the case, the recommendations will be implemented nationwide and will enjoy official support. New horizons will open for all gifted children in South Africa, and in future years the country will reap the benefit of a Government-supported national policy for the education of its "children of gold", as Plato called them.

I should also mention another important development in the area of gifted education in South Africa. During the past number of years several education departments, private organisations and teacher

training institutions have been actively engaged in gifted programmes. I would be failing in my duty if I did not pay homage to these enthusiastic and dedicated educators for their pioneering work here at the southern tip of the African continent.

In a relatively short period of time these men and women have been able to expose approximately 9 000 gifted children annually to programmes designed for their needs. And although this number constitutes only about 5% of our total school population of roughly 170 000 highly gifted children, we should raise our hats to a band of dedicated people for their untiring efforts in the interests of a worthy cause.

It is my sincere wish that this conference will be of value to all of you. Education cannot develop in isolation, and we South Africans feel privileged to share our knowledge with professional leaders from abroad. I also wish to assure you that we are more than willing to make our contribution to the improvement of man's well-being world-wide.

In the year 545 B.C. Theognis used these words in a conversation with his friend Cyrnus:

> "Even to a wicked man a divinity gives wealth, Cyrnus, but to few men comes the gift of excellence."

In declaring this conference open, I wish you not only the benefit of a fruitful exchange of ideas, but above all the gift of excellence in your personal efforts on behalf of our gifted children.